

# Loon



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The loons are large water birds that are as well known for their weird voices as for their extraordinary ability to dive and swim beneath the surface. Anyone who has camped beside a northern lake in spring is familiar with their haunting calls.

Loons are long-bodied birds with short tails, thick necks, and strong dagger-like bills. Their sharp bills and their habit of swimming low down in the water separates them from the ducks and geese. They may be distinguished from their relatives, the grebes, by their larger size, thicker necks, and sleek heads. All of the larger grebes bear crests in spring.

Four species of loons occur in Canada. Three are arctic or sub-arctic breeders and are rarely seen except on migration. The fourth, the common loon, is the one best known. Much that may be said about this bird applies equally well to the others.

The common loon (*Gavia immer*) once nested on most of our wooded lakes from Newfoundland to British Columbia. There are still resort lakes where its laughing call is a familiar sound, but it prefers solitude. Each year motor boats and cottages are driving more and more loons to remoter places.

### Appearance

The common loon is about the size of a small goose. It is easily recognized in spring when white marks arranged in regular lines across its black back and wings give it a finely checkered appearance. Its head and neck are glossy black. The bird carries an obvious necklace of white marks and the upper throat bears a thin line of white spots. The three-inch bill is black, and the bird has red eyes. The silvery underparts are best seen when the loon stands upon the water to flap its wings, or rolls upon its side to preen. The sexes, as in all loons, look alike.

The common loon loses its breeding plumage in late summer. In winter it is dull gray with a

dingy white throat. Even the red eyes lose colour and become brown.

The loons are all dressed in smooth, compact plumage that is watertight. Indians once used loon skins for making watertight bags, and the early settlers fashioned capes and other articles of clothing from them.

The legs of loons are placed far back, and the upper joint is encased in the body. This allows them little freedom of movement on land. Loons can only waddle awkwardly in an almost upright position or shuffle forward on wings and breast. Their short wings cannot lift their heavy bodies from the ground, and the birds require a long splashing run across the water to get into the air.

### Swimming ability

Loons may be clumsy on land but they are unequalled in the water. They swim rapidly with powerful thrusts of their large webbed feet. They are even more at home beneath the surface. The birds plunge forward with arched necks to dive with little disturbance of the water. They are incredibly quick to dive.

The birds remain submerged for lengthy periods and at times travel long distances under water. They are extremely fast beneath the surface too. A loon may dive a hundred yards in front of a sailboat and in a few moments surface a hundred yards behind. The birds occasionally go to great depths in pursuit of fish, for loons have been caught in fish nets sixty feet below the surface. When alarmed, loons slowly sink their bodies until only head and neck remain above the water.

### In flight

In the air loons appear hump-backed and pointed at each end. The head and neck are carried below the level of the back, and the large feet trail slightly downwards. The birds meet the water breast first. They seem unable to brake when in the air and plough a long furrow in the water before they lose their momentum.

### Voice

Loons are perhaps best known for their characteristic calls. The call most often heard is a laughing "ha-ha-ha-ha-ha". It has a mirthless, insane quality that has given rise to the expression, "As crazy as a loon!" A wolf-like wail is usually given at evening or at the approach of a storm. This cry is a prolonged "Who-who-who-WHO-o-o-o" rising and falling to end on tremulous notes. Sometimes a loon will give this call at dusk and then from nearby lakes or bays others will take it up. From far away the echoing cries are heard until the night is full of the birds' wild wailing.

### Breeding

Small lakes, bordered by tamarack and spruce, are favourite breeding spots for common loons.

Breeding  
 Winter  
 Breeding and winter  
 Migration





Side view of a loon swimming



When alarmed, loons slowly sink their bodies until only head and neck remain above the water



Loons are solitary nesters and small lakes never hold more than one pair of breeding birds. On larger lakes pairs may take over different bays, but always at some distance from one another.

The birds are paired when they arrive at the breeding grounds in May. They probably mate for life. Courting behaviour consists in part of wild races across the water. The birds tread water side by side as they make this splashing dash. Sometimes the pair will swim slowly towards each other until their bodies touch. Then both bills are pointed to the sky.

Nesting starts in early June. Nesting material is usually aquatic vegetation. The nest is often placed on the end of a point that juts into the lake or on an island. Sometimes nests are built up on muskrat houses or patches of floating bog vegetation. In any event the nests are always placed where the birds may slip directly from them to the water. The same sites are often used from year to year.

Normally two eggs are laid. They are about three and one-half inches long and may vary from dark olive-green to brown. The shells have a smooth, yet granular surface and are sprinkled with dark spots. No attempt is made to cover them when the bird leaves the nest, but they blend well with the sodden, dark weeds on which they are laid.

Both birds take turns at incubating. The sitting bird is very wary and is seldom seen on the nest. Well before an enemy is close to the nest, both birds are usually well out on the water.

The eggs hatch in about thirty days. The young at first are covered in thick brown-black down. They leave the nest soon after hatching and can swim at once, but do not dive for several days. For the first week or two the young are frequently carried on one or other of the old birds' backs.

The baby loons are fed on small fish from the start. They grow rapidly, lose their down, and acquire gray feathers. By late September they can fly and are almost as large as their parents.

The loons do not attain full breeding plumage until their third year. The immature birds, unlike the gulls and geese, do not migrate in spring. They congregate in summer on coastal waters and do not visit their nesting grounds until they are ready to breed.

The birds leave their nesting areas in October. Some remain on lakes as far north as they can find open water, but most go to sea off both our coasts.

### Food

Loons live mainly on fish which they readily catch when swimming under water. Their large feet propel them in the depths, and the wings are used only when an extra spurt is needed. Their diet also includes molluscs, frogs, and vegetation.

Although loons are sometimes accused of depleting game-fish populations, it is likely that they eat little but small coarse fish. In many of

their breeding lakes no others are available. In any event loons are too thinly spread to do much harm. On the contrary, they may be useful in removing unwanted species. And they may also provide necessary checks on fish populations by keeping them from overcrowding.

### Conservation

The loon is protected by federal law and may not be hunted. Since their nests are so close to the water that the wash of motorboats may destroy the nest and eggs, cottagers and boaters can help preserve this bird by not disturbing it during the early summer breeding season. Otherwise, this beautiful bird, whose eerie cries are so evocative of the feeling of wilderness, will be increasingly unknown to most Canadians.

### Other species

The yellow-billed loon (*Gavia adamsii*) is almost a counterpart of the common loon, although it is usually larger. It may be distinguished only by its yellow-white bill, the lower half of which angles up. This bird breeds from Great Slave Lake northward across the western Arctic. It winters on northern seas and is not likely to be seen in settled parts of Canada.

The arctic loon (*Gavia arctica*) is a small loon that should be looked for in western Canada. It is intermediate between the ducks and geese in size and is a sleek, handsome bird. The crown and hind neck are pearl-gray and the under-neck and throat are black. A series of white lines streaks the sides of the upper breast, and the underparts are silvery white. White squares arranged in lines form four obvious patterns on the back of wings and upper back.

This loon also breeds from Great Slave Lake north to the Arctic Coast and islands. It was formerly known as the Pacific loon and congregates in large numbers off the West Coast in winter. In recent years numerous arctic loons have been seen on autumn migration in west-central Alberta.

The red-throated loon (*Gavia stellata*) is about the same size as the arctic loon. It too is a lovely bird. The head and neck are soft slate-gray and the throat bears a triangular patch of chestnut-red. The back of its neck is streaked with fine white lines. Wings and back are brownish gray with little marking. Like the rest of the loons its underparts are white.

This bird breeds across the northern parts of Canada. It takes off from water more readily than the other loons and often nests on small tundra ponds. The red-throated loon may be seen in both eastern and western Canada when on passage, but is more common in the Great Lakes region. It winters off both our coasts.



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